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Standardization of Geographical Names**

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**Reflection on the past, present and future, the fiftieth anniversary of  
the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical  
Names**

**Norden Division**

**A short outline of the Division's composition, history and  
contribution as of 2017**

Submitted by Norway \*\*

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\*\* Prepared by Botolv Helleland, Norway

## **NORDEN DIVISION**

### **A short outline of the Division's composition, history and contribution as of 2017 Submitted by Botolv Helleland, Norway**

#### I. Introduction

The Norden Division is one of 14 linguistic/geographical divisions which were created at the second UNCSGN in 1972 (currently the number is 24). Following seven countries are members of the Division: Denmark, Finland, Faroe Islands, Greenland (Nuuk), Iceland, Norway, and Sweden (Faroe Islands and Greenland are Danish dependencies with self-government).

All countries represent Scandinavian languages, but Finland only for the part of its other national language Swedish. The other national language of Finland, Finnish, and Saami languages are Uralic languages. The domicile area of people speaking Saami languages crosses the borders of countries and covers northern parts of the Norden Division member states Norway, Sweden and Finland.

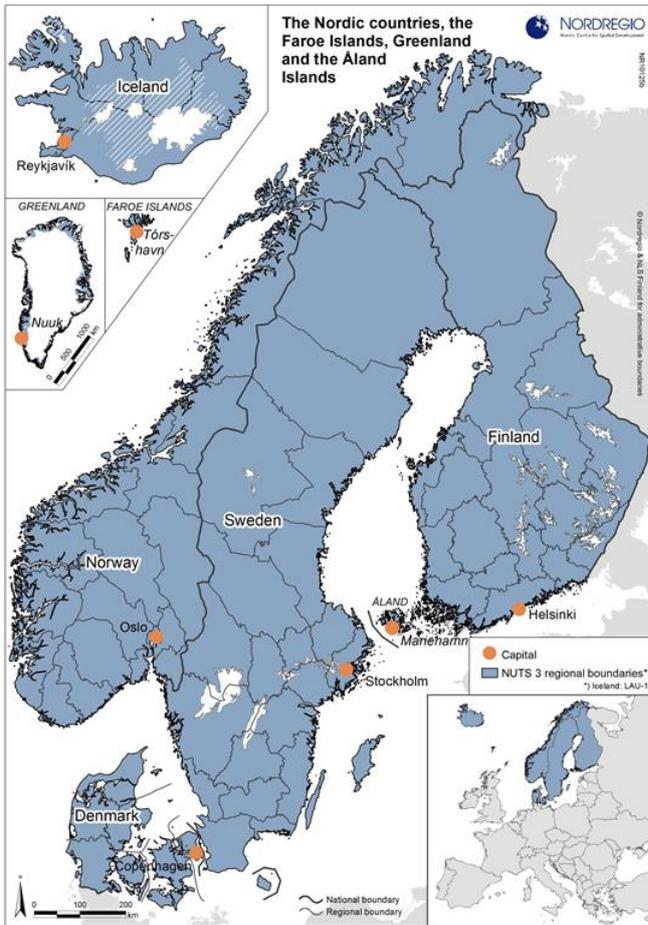
Normally the chair serves for the period between two Conferences. The first chair person of the Division was Per Hovda (Norway). Then followed Allan Rostvik (Sweden) Eeva Maria Närhi (Finland), Botolv Helleland (Norway), Hans Ringstam (Sweden), Sirkka Paikkala (Finland) and Peder Gammeltoft (Denmark – two terms). Ingvil Nordland, Norway, will serve as chair after the 11<sup>th</sup> UNCSGN. The Division reports regularly to UNGEGN and UNCSGN. All countries of the Division are involved in its work. For example, in the seven sessions held in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the member states of the ND have presented 55 working papers (Norway 18, Sweden 12, Finland 23, and Denmark 2. Iceland has reported in the Division reports).

#### I. Homepage/website

The Norden Division has had its own homepage (website) since 2008 (<http://nordendivision.nfi.ku.dk/>). The homepage is organized according to UNGEGN Resolution I/4 from 1967 on National Standardization. The aim of the homepage is to present concise information about UNGEGN issues within the Norden Division area with links to additional information within the UNGEGN structure and within the national authorities of the Norden Division. The representatives of the member countries are encouraged to submit news for inclusion in the homepage. Thus the homepage gives the member countries opportunity to keep themselves updated on geographical names activities in the other countries of the Division. Most of the reports from the Division are accessible at the UNGEGN home page (<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/sessions.html>).

The Norden Division homepage was created by Peder Gammeltoft at the start of his first term as Chair of the Division. He has accepted to being in charge of the homepage for a third term. The homepage is being updated regularly.

# NORDEN DIVISION



Map 1. Countries belonging to the Norden Division



Map 2. Norden in a North-European perspective

## II. Norden Divison – composition and meetings

From the beginning, the members of the Division were partly cartographers and partly philologists (name researchers), but also persons with other relevant background might participate. The costs, such as travelling expenses, were normally covered by the overall governmental bodies.

The Chair of the Division is elected in the year of the Conference and normally serves for the adjacent term, i.e. five years. A secretary is also elected for the same term, normally from the same country as the Chair. The chairmanship switches between the member countries.



The Norden Division members participating in the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, New York, 31 July – 9 August 2012. First row from the left: Botolv Helleland (President of the Tenth UNCSGN, Norway), Johnny Andersen (Norway), Carl Christian Olsen (Greenland), Teemu Leskinen (Finland), Staffan Nyström (Sweden), Sirkka Paikkala (Finland), Peder Gammeltoft (Chair, Denmark), Annette Torensjö (Sweden), John Jensen (Denmark), Leif Nilsson (Sweden). The back row representing the organizers, from the left: Helen Kerfoot (Previous UNGEGN Chair, Canada), Sergei Cherniavsky (Secretary of the Conference), Stefan Schweinfest (Director of the UN Statistics Division), Bill Watt (UNGEGN Chair, Australia).

The Division has met regularly since the start, including meetings during UNGEGN Sessions and Conferences. On some occasions the Division meetings were organized in combination with other meetings such as toponymic conferences. From 1997 and onwards the Division has reported directly to the Conferences.

During Finland's chairmanship in 2002–2007, Denmark joined the Norden Division meetings again after a period of absence. Both Greenland and Iceland took part in the Division and UNGEGN activities during that period for the first time.

### III. Activities and achievements

This chapter does not give a complete outline of the Division's activities and achievements. Already at the first Conference in 1967, Denmark, Norway and Sweden gave an account of a common Scandinavian transcription for geographical names written in the Cyrillic alphabet and that a similar work for transcription from other writing systems like Arabic and Chinese was in progress ([https://unstats.un.org/Unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/1st-uncsgn-docs/e\\_conf\\_53\\_L67\\_en.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/Unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/1st-uncsgn-docs/e_conf_53_L67_en.pdf)). At the first conference in 1967 the definition of an essential concept, *generic term*, was discussed (Committee II). Finland proposed a new text for the definition. Seconded by other delegates this text was approved, and included in the Resolution I/19 C Definition of "generic term". The three Scandinavian countries also reported on a common spelling of the sea name *Skagerrak*. At the Fourth Conference the Division reported on a list on Nordic spelling forms of states, inhabitant names and connected adjectives, issued by the Scandinavian Languages Secretariat.

The Norden Division has been active in taking care and reminding of the cultural aspects of place names, compiling guidelines on different topics, such as commemorative naming, name planning in multilingual areas, gazetteers on exonyms, dictionaries on place names and compiling place name databases. Finland has also been very active in matters concerning bilingualism and taking it into account in legislation, in office treatment of multilingual names and in names written in maps.

In 1989 the Norden Division organized a meeting in Gävle, Sweden, to discuss uniformity on maps and charts as well as the status of toponymic data bases in the Nordic countries.

At the Division meeting in March 1992 in Helsinki, Finland, the participants discussed the reduction of exonyms in line with the UNGEGN resolutions. Other topics at the meeting were the stability of the Romanization systems and how to trigger the implementation of recommendations of UNGEGN in internal institutions ([https://unstats.un.org/Unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/6th-uncsgn-docs/e\\_conf\\_85\\_L67.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/Unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/6th-uncsgn-docs/e_conf_85_L67.pdf)). An ad hoc group was set up to discuss a common policy for reducing exonyms in accordance with the resolutions II 28, 29, III 18, 19, IV 20). In connection with the European Heritage

Days in 1999 Finland chose “Place names — the memory of places” as a theme. In 2010 the European Heritage Days were celebrated in Finland in co-operation with a campaign for the cultural environment (Jokaisen Oma Ympäristö) coordinated by the Finnish Local Heritage Federation. With connection to the campaign, an exhibition presenting place names (their origin, planning, collecting and recording) and checking the names on a basic map was arranged in Finnish, Swedish, Saami and English. The English version of the exhibition, “The Story of a Place Name”, is available at [https://www.kotus.fi/en/on\\_language/names/the\\_story\\_of\\_a\\_place\\_name](https://www.kotus.fi/en/on_language/names/the_story_of_a_place_name)

At the Division meeting in Oslo 2005, Sirkka Paikkala (Finland) presented amendments to the statute of UNGEGN with relation to the cultural value of the geographical names. These amendments were presented again in the 29th session of UNGEGN in Bangkok (WP.55/20) by the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage. The Group of Experts decided to recommend to the Economic and Social Council amendments to the statute, as contained in working paper WP.55/20.

At the Division meeting in Copenhagen in June 2012 the various countries reported on the progress and changes since the last meeting. Greenland for instance, referred to a publication of new sea charts where geographical names were entered onto the maps in Greenlandic (Inuit). For this work, a number of new geographical names have been recorded topographical maps.

Systematic field collection of place names is a topic which has been discussed and followed up regularly, and all the countries of the division have produced manuals for this work. A Swedish publication on the work of UNGEGN (in Swedish) was presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Session in 2006. All the countries have been active in digitalization projects of place names.

#### V. Division meetings in cooperation with other divisions and organizations

Since the early 1970ies the Norden Division has organized meetings in combination with conferences and seminars dealing with geographical names standardization and other toponymic issues. Thus Norway reported on a joint Nordic symposium on place names terminology in Oslo in October 1972, being the first symposium of the newly established Nordic Cooperative Committee for Onomastic Research (NORNA). In the subsequent years NORNA organized a number of symposia within name research, including place names standardization.

There has been a close cooperation between the Norden Division and the Baltic Division since the very first meeting of the Baltic Division in 1995. At that meeting two experts from the Norden Division were present. In 1997 toponymic courses were organized in Riga, with support by experts from Finland, Norway and Sweden. In 2013 a joint day of meetings of both divisions was held in Tallinn, followed by a seminar on Integration of onomastic data into geo-spatial infrastructure ([http://www.eki.ee/knn/ungegn/bd16\\_seminar\\_ag.htm](http://www.eki.ee/knn/ungegn/bd16_seminar_ag.htm)).

In October 2010 a joint arrangement between the Norden Division and the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology took place at the Department for Language and Folklore in Uppsala, Sweden ([https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/26th-gegn-docs/WP/WP80\\_Report%20of%20the%20Working%20Group%20on%20Toponymic%20Terminology2.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/26th-gegn-docs/WP/WP80_Report%20of%20the%20Working%20Group%20on%20Toponymic%20Terminology2.pdf)).

A joint meeting of the Norden Division and the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage took place in September 2015 at the Department of Nordic Research at Copenhagen. This meeting was also attended by members of the Working Group on Implementation and Evaluation and the Working Group on Publicity and Funding.

## VI. Toponymic guidelines

At the Fourth Conference the Norden Division reported that toponymic guidelines for cartography were presented by all the Nordic countries. Several countries have submitted updated versions of the guidelines at later Conferences and Sessions. For instance, Finland has presented 4 editions (1981, 1994, 1998 and 2004), and 10 revised versions. The last editions are searchable at the UNGEGN Homepage.

## VII. Handling of geographical names in minority areas

At the Second Conference the Norden Division presented a draft resolution recommending that native speakers, where possible, adopt a common orthography for all geographical names of the minority language. At the Third Conference the Division reported that the Saami organizations in the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland had agreed upon a common North Saami orthography. At the Fifth Conference it was reported that the new spelling had been used in the revised maps. The status of geographical names used by minorities in the Nordic countries was further discussed at a meeting 1992. This also includes Kvenish (Finnish) in Northern Norway.

By law, road signs in Norwegian Saami municipalities shall have the Saami name on top. This makes sense in most cases but can leave to confusion in some situations, mostly larger cities, where the Saami name is less used. The administration recommends making the order of names voluntary. In Finland the Finnish name is always mentioned first, followed by possible North Saami, Inari Saami and Skolt Saami names – in this particular order. Order is not defined in the law.

Since 1984, the Greenland Place Names Committee (Nunat Aqqinik Aalajangiisartut, <http://nordendivision.nfi.ku.dk/authorities/>) has been in charge of place names standardization in Greenland. Inuit names are used in maps and on signs etc. Since 2011, the Faroe Islands have had its own place names committee, Staðarnavnnevndin.

As a joint project of the Norden Division countries, the Nordic Place Names Database and a corresponding web service, NONDB, was published in 1999. The NONDB project was coordinated, and the database hosted by the National Land Survey of Finland. The database included some 2000 standardized geographical names, from all Nordic mapping agencies' datasets. The character set standard applied was Unicode, in order to handle, e.g., the Saami names and spellings properly. Due to outdated technology, the NONDB database and service were shut down in 2007.

The Norden Division is looking into the possibility of producing an online web-service based resource for Minority geographical names within the Norden Division area. For the other countries see <http://nordendivision.nfi.ku.dk/legislation/>

### VIII. Legislation and geographical name usage

All countries within the Norden Division have language laws and regulations on language use, only a few Nordic countries have specific laws on geographical names (Greenland and Norway). Elsewhere in the Norden Division countries, geographical names regulations are either embedded in other, non-name-specific, laws or exist in the form of departmental orders (<http://nordendivision.nfi.ku.dk/legislation/>). In Sweden geographical names are treated according to the Act concerning Ancient Monuments and Finds. In Finland suggestions for enacting an Act on Place Names have been made several times, lastly in January 2014 as part of the Action Plan for Clear Administrative Language. Finland ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in May 2013.

The first comprehensive legislation on geographical names in Iceland was passed in Parliament in March 2015. The Act states that the National Land Survey of Iceland is responsible for registration, maintenance and dissemination of a geographical names database in consultation with the Institute for Icelandic Studies. A revision of the Norwegian Place-names Act of 1990 with amendments of 2005 was passed by the Parliament in June 2016. The new law gives land owners the right to decide on the spelling of the names of their single holdings.

A table containing the main points of legislation and the main steps in the standardization procedure in the Norden Division countries is shown below.

NORDEN DIVISION

Country	Legislation	Consultancy	Decision-maker
Denmark	Departmental order of 1978	Place-Name Committee and Name Research Section at University of Copenhagen	<i>Authorized geographical names:</i> Place-Name Committee under the Ministry of Culture; <i>Names of municipalities and regions:</i> Ministry of the Interior; <i>Names on mapping products:</i> The Agency for Data Supply and Efficiency; <i>Names of streets, roads and squares:</i> Municipalities
Greenland	Greenland Parliament Law 1989, Home Rule Departmental Order 1990	Nunat Aqqinik Aalajangiisartut (Greenland Place Names Committee)	<i>Authorized geographical names:</i> Nunat Aqqinik Aalajangiisartut (Greenland Place Names Committee); <i>Names of streets, roads and squares:</i> Municipalities
Faroe Islands	Faroese Parliament Law 2010	Staðarnavnanevndin (Faroe Islands Place Names Committee)	<i>Authorized geographical names:</i> Staðarnavnanevndin (Faroe Islands Place Names Committee)
Finland	No specific law covering place names	<b>The University of Oulu</b> (Saami names) and according to the law the Institute for the Languages of Finland (Finnish and Swedish names)	The National Land Survey for inherited toponyms (after consulting the above-mentioned institutes), municipalities for street names, government for names of administrative units
Iceland	Law on Place Names 2015	The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Division of Place Names	Municipalities. Government for areas outside municipalities. The Place Names Committee can rule about place names
Norway	Law on Standardization of Place Names 1990, revised 2015. Regulation of 1991, 2017	Regional Place names consultants administered by the Norwegian Language Council and the Saami Parliament	The Mapping Authority for names of settlements and natural features. Government for names of towns and administrative divisions. The municipalities for street names and other urban names
Sweden	The paragraph on 'good place-name	The Institute for Language and Folklore,	Lantmäteriet (The Mapping, Cadastral and Land Registration

	practice' in the Historic Environment Act. Regulation with instructions for Lantmäteriet	the Swedish National Heritage Board, the municipalities	Authority) for names of settlements, real estates and natural features. The municipalities for street names and other urban names
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Table 1. Survey of the main steps of the standardization procedure in the countries of the Norden Division: Legislation, consultancies and decisions-makers.

#### IX. Individual contributions to UNGEGN and Conferences

Members of the Norden Division have contributed in several ways to UNGEGN, such as drafting resolutions and acting as elected representatives at Sessions and Conferences. Members of the Division have also taken responsibility in Working Groups and contributed to special presentations.

#### X. Challenges – looking ahead

There is all reason to believe that the Norden Division will continue its contribution to UNGEGN. Hopefully other countries have taken advantage of some of the Division's presentations at Sessions and Conferences. At the same time the Nordic countries have benefited from the initiatives and experiences presented by other countries. Looking ahead, some of the challenges are attached to the increasing influence by unofficial and private use of geographical names, in particular the use of business names as place names. English is strengthening its influence, a fact which may be a threat to smaller languages. Protecting and preserving inherited names is a major issue for all countries and a concern for UNGEGN.

The work in the Division itself has proved to be very useful both in terms of exchanging knowledge within the Division and promoting cooperation in various fields of geographical names. Although the universities tend to reduce the resources for name research the interest for place names is noticeable among the public. A scientific approach to geographical names remains a paramount precondition for a responsible handling of geographical names. Also in this respect the Norden Division will continue to contribute.